

# MEMOIR OF HANSERD KNOLLYS, M.A.

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Hanserd Knollys, the first pastor of the first church in Dover, New Hampshire, is a name eminent among the English Baptists of the 17<sup>th</sup> century. He was born at Cawkwell, a village in Lincolnshire, England, in 1598; was educated for the ministry at Cambridge; and ordained by the Bishop of Peterborough, June 29, 1529. Having embraced the principles of the persecuted Puritans, he was arrested in Boston, in his native county, 1636, by virtual of a warrant from the odious High Commission Court; but the man in whose custody he was, being conscience stricken, connived at his escape, and he went up to London to find a passage to America. There he was obliged to wait so long, that when he embarked "he had but just six brass farthings left, and no silver or gold." He was accompanied by his wife, but his only child died on the passage, which was a very tedious one of twelve weeks. Backus (I. p. 101) says he came over in the spring of 1638; and he himself says that he lived in Dover "about four years," yet he returned to England in 1641. On arriving at Boston, he says "being very poor, I was necessitated to work daily with my hoe for the space of almost three weeks. The magistrates were told by the ministers that I was an Antinomian, and desired they would not suffer me to abide in their patent." Two gentlemen from Dover, being there in Boston, invited me to accompany them on their return and preach there. He accordingly went with them; but Burdet who had usurped the government of Dover at that time, forbid him. On Burdet's removal in the fall of 1638, (September) "the people," says Winthrop, "called Mr. Knollys, and in a short time he gathered some of the best minded into a church body, and became their pastor." (Winthrop--vol. i. p. 326) This appears to have been the first church formed in Dover, and perhaps in New Hampshire, unless Wheelwright's church, at Exeter, (which is spoken of by Winthrop as existing in October, 1638--vol. i. p. 281) preceded it. Here he continued in the peaceful discharge of the duties of his sacred function for two years, till interrupted by the arrival of Mr. Thomas Larkham, in 1640.

Up to this period, the character of Mr. Knollys appeared to be that of a good man--a learned and pious minister of the gospel--suffering exile and reproach and poverty for conscience' sake. If the letter, which he wrote to England soon after arriving at Boston, in which he reflected strongly upon the religion and government of Massachusetts, be thought an exception, his full, ingenuous and satisfactory confession of his error in Boston, must be regarded as an honor to his christian principles. It is by mistake that Dr. Belknap has imputed to him the improper language of Underhill himself, and Gov. Hutchinson has fallen into a similar misapprehension on the same subject. This blot should be wiped away from the reputation of Knollys. (See Winthrop--I. p. 292)

The arrival of Larkham gave occasion to a new development of his character. Larkham had been a minister in Northham, England. He was a man of wealth and popular talents, and he soon formed a party who determined to remove Knollys. Knollys, according to Belknap, "generously gave way to popular prejudice, and suffered Larkham to take his place; who soon discover his licentious principles, by receiving into the church persons of immoral characters, and assuming, like Burdet, the civil as well as ecclesiastical authority. The better sort of the people were displeased, and restored Knollys to his office, who excommunicated Larkham." The riot that followed in April, 1641, is, by Winthrop, imputed

to Larkham; who, he says "laid violent hands on Mr. Knollys." It is doubtful whether, in the peculiar circumstances in which the later was placed, as stated by Winthrop, it did not appear his duty, as a citizen, to take the part that he did. Candid minds will weigh these circumstances, at this time, more impartially than the illegal and ex parte court which fined him £100, and ordered him to depart the plantation (Winthrop--II. p. 27).

It is worth of consideration, whether his sentiments as a Baptist had not much influence against him in the view of many of the magistrates. That was a Baptist, when called to be pastor of the first church in Dover, is affirmed by Dr. Belknap, who styles him "as Anabaptist of the Antinomian cast." The doctor seems, in some other particulars to regard Knollys, to forget his wanted candor.

The origin of the controversy between Larkham and Knollys is attributed by Lechford as much to their different views of baptism as to other points. He says, "they fell out about baptizing children, receiving members, burial of the dead." (Winthrop II. note. p.27.) Winthrop says, "there soon grew sharp contention between him (Larkham) and Mr. Knollys, to whom the more religious still adhered; whereupon they were divided into two churches." The testimony is strongly in Mr. Knollys' favour. Commissioners having been sent from Massachusetts to adjust the difficulty, a reconcilliation was effected, by releasing Larkham from his excommunication, and Knollys from the censures of an illegal court.

But at this juncture arose the cloud that has in this country overshadowed his fair fame. Both Winthrop and Belknap say, that "a discovery was made of his failure in a point of chastity": and that he himself acknowledged before the church that he had been guilty of improper "dalliance" towards two young women that lived in his family; and that, on this account, he was dismissed by the church, and removed from Dover. Admitting all this to be true, (and more than this was once true of so good a man as David) his criminality seems to have been much exaggerated by Hubbard and others. And three or four circumstances seem to throw an air of doubt over this accusation. 1. In his "Account of his own Life," published in England, he gives this as the reason of his leaving Dover--"Being sent for back to England by my aged father, I returned with my wife, and one child about three years old." (Backus--I. p. 102) 2. His name is found on the judicial records of New Hampshire in 1641, as plaintiff in an action of slander; which, though in consequence of his return to England never prosecuted, seems to imply that he regarded himself as an injured man. (See Exeter News-Letter, May 1, 1832.) 3. The historians, who report the case, being of different sentiments from him, are evidently (though unintentionally prejudiced against him. 4. Cotton Mather (who wrote within about fifty years of his time) expressly distinguishes Knollys from the number of "scandalous" ministers, and places him in that class, "whose names," he says "deserve to live in our book for their piety, although their particular opinions were such as to be disserviceable unto the declared and supposed interests of our churches. Of these were some godly Anabaptists, as namely, Mr. Hanserd Knollys, of Dover, etc., and Mr. Miles, of Swansey, etc." And what seems particularly to the point, Mather adds, "Both of these have a respectful character in the churches of this wilderness." (Magnalia--Vol. I. Book III. p.221.) In view of these facts, let the reader judge of the extent of Knollys' criminality, and how far it affects his general character as a christian minister.

Mr. Knollys arrived in London, December 24, 1641. There he gathered a flourishing Baptist church, in great St. Helen's, of which he continued the pastor till his death, September 19, 1691, at the advanced age of 93. His name appears affixed to the Baptist Confession of Faith, in 1643; which even the bitter Dr. Featly admitted to be "an orthodox confession." This shows how little he deserved to be called an Antinomian. Of his learning, some judgement may be formed from the fact, that he published, in 1648, "The Elements of Hebrew Grammar." Yet, this is the man whom his enemies ridiculed by a

miserable pun upon his name, calling him "Absurdo Knowless." Of his pulpit talents, we may form some opinion from the fact, that his congregation "was seldom less than 1000 auditors." His name is the first attached to the Baptist Confession of Faith, published in 1689, the admirable preface to which was probably from his pen. And as to his general character after his return to England, we have the testimony of Neal, that "he suffered deeply in the cause of non-conformity, being universally esteemed and beloved by all his brethren." (Neal--Vol. I. p.216.) And Cotton Mather tells us he died "a good man, in a good old age." (Magnalia--Vol I. p. 221.)